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Why Good People Commit Evil Acts

by Nico Dituri

(English 1102)

Abu Ghraib was a prison in Iraq during the American War on Terror, but it wasn't just any prison. It became the spotlight of international news after photos of detainees being tortured, beaten and raped by American soldiers and CIA personnel were leaked. These horrific acts were carried out behind closed doors for almost a year until Amnesty International published reports of human rights violations. American soldiers and federal government personnel are held to a very high standard. Integrity and respect are pillars of the American military. How is it that otherwise respectable men and women could commit such intolerable acts? This whole event raises one very important and complex question: Why do good people commit evil acts? There are several main concepts when discovering why: power, conformity, obedience to authority and vengeance. What follows is an explanation of several different instances involving the abuse of power, the power of conformity and obedience, and a look into the heart of man through a more spiritual lens as well.

First is the Stanford Prison Experiment, conducted by Phillip Zimbardo in 1971. Zimbardo is famous for studying the psychology of evil as a result of his experiment. In the experiment, Zimbardo took 24 graduate students from Stanford University, and assigned each to the role of either prison guard or prisoner, with Zimbardo as the prison's superintendent. It took place in the basement of the Stanford University psychology building and was supposed to last for two weeks. The motive of the experiment was to study the psychological effects of life in prison. Soon after the experiment started, Zimbardo wrote that "the guards quickly became creatively evil and sadistic and many prisoners began having extreme stress reactions and had to be released" (qtd. in Sword 1).

The guards forced the prisoners to sleep on concrete, and even stole their clothes. A few of the students left the experiment early, but the majority stayed and accepted the psychological torture. According to Zimbardo, the "power of a host of situational variables can dominate an individual's will to resist" (qtd. in Grant). When placed in a naturally submissive role such as prisoner, people tend to accept the punishment given to them. Zimbardo was so caught up in his role of warden that he allowed the guards' emotional abuse toward their peers to continue for six days, until his girlfriend threatened to leave him if he didn't shut the experiment down (Zimbardo 4). Zimbardo had just shed light on a concept that he would spend the rest of his career studying: why good people commit evil acts.

It is important to understand the situation these students were put in. They were placed in an unfamiliar environment, and most importantly, the guards were given complete control over other humans. When a person is placed in a position of authority, for example, as a prison guard, chances are the environment is new and stressful. Naturally, most people have never had complete control over another person's life. When adding in prejudice, and a feeling of superiority over someone like a criminal or someone who doesn't fit well with society's standards, and you have a recipe for misconduct from the authority figure. For example, in Abu Ghraib, the war prison in Iraq, American CIA and military personnel were placed in a position of complete control over a group of people that were already looked at as enemies of the American way of life. Zimbardo himself even became nonempathetic during the experiment, allowing the students to continue the mistreatment. Both Zimbardo and these military personnel were never properly trained on properly managing prisoners. This leads to incredible stress, and is one of the causes of the misconduct.

Many claim that this is the result of a few "bad apples" at the Abu Ghraib prison, thus

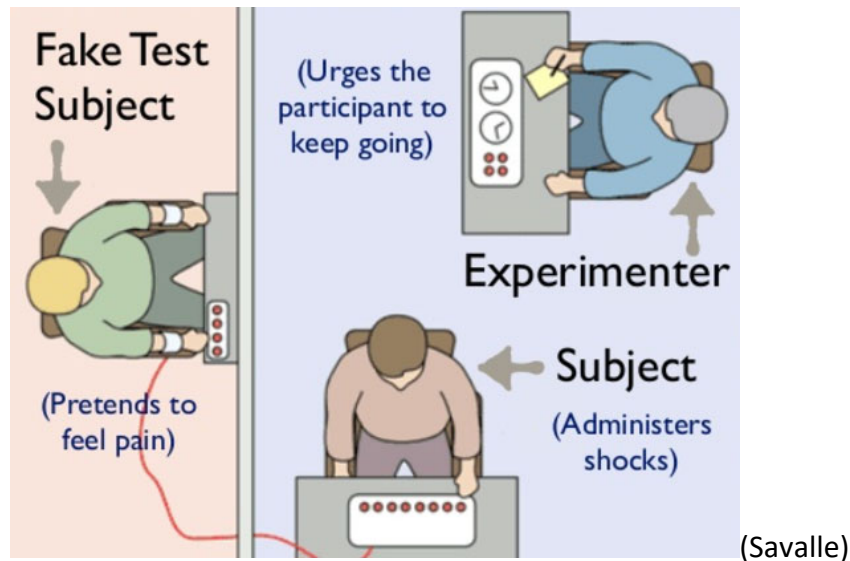
causing the acts of misconduct. Zimbardo's rebuttal is that the American servicemen were “good apples that were forced to operate in a Bad Barrel (the Situation) created by Bad Barrel Makers (the System)” (qtd. in Sword). In fact, Phillip Zimbardo even defended one of the prison guards in court, explaining that this individual's acts were the result of the stressful situation he was placed in. The prison guard was granted a less severe sentence, thanks to Zimbardo's defense in court (Zimbardo). The students involved in the Stanford Prison Experiment and the American servicemen at Abu Ghraib weren't necessarily evil people, but were placed in a situation in which most people would act unrighteous. These students and servicemen were not acclimated to work twelve straight hours every night in a harsh environment such as a prison.

There are many other psychological theories that try to explain why good people commit evil acts. One of these concepts is known as “The Pressure to Conform.” Dr. Travis Bradberry states that “When a group engages in unethical behavior, individuals are far more likely to participate in or condone that behavior rather than risk standing out” (Bradberry). Every person has some kind of desire to fit into society. This concept can be easily seen in a school setting, where young adults or children tend to behave in unorthodox ways just to fit in. A bully may find themselves a following of bystanders that even participate in the act, for fear of becoming targets as well. This can also be cited as a “mob mentality,” in which many of the group members don't really understand the motive that they're in support of. Most people like to believe that they would be the hero that stands up to the individuals acting wrongly in the situation, but the pressure to conform can be hard resist.

Another psychological force that explains why men may commit evil acts is the obedience to authority. It's hard for people to defy the authority figures in their lives, but easy to justify their actions if the authority commands them to act wrongly. People may feel less responsible for their actions if they're just following orders. They may use this excuse to rationalize their actions, when deep down they know it is morally wrong. Joshua Hren writes in his article, “Tailor-Made for Evil: Hiding Foul Things with Garments of Legal Fictions,” that “although law ought to be a ‘dictate of reason’ concerning ‘what should be done to insure the common good,’ legality can also be a garment by which we try to cover our guilt” (Hren 35). We may use certain ideas of legality to rationalize our actions. This is a result of a society that rewards obedience.

This concept is very prevalent when looking at how the Nazis conducted themselves during the Holocaust. When Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann was on trial for his actions during the genocide, Hannah Arendt, a reporter for the trial, came to a unique conclusion. Dr. Adam Grant writes that “she argued that Eichmann was a plain bureaucrat, seeing himself as ‘a law-abiding citizen’ who ‘did his duty’ and ‘obeyed orders’ She called it ‘the banality of evil’” (Grant). Something banal is commonplace, nothing out of the ordinary. Arendt illustrates that it is a scary idea when evil has become as normal and banal as just following orders blindly. The problem is the toleration of evil: First it is tolerated, and then it becomes accepted as the norm.

The Milgram Experiment was a psychological experiment conducted by Stanley Milgram of Yale University. He tested the subjects' obedience to authority, no matter how cruel the command was. The results show that when instructed by authority, people will commit acts that they normally would never do.



The illustration above shows how the experiment was originally conducted. The experimenter would demand that the subject, who was playing the role of a teacher trying to teach a student certain content, administer a shock to the student if a question was answered wrong. The student was actually an actor, and really wasn't feeling any pain from the electroshock. The subject had the option to crank up the voltage of the shocks. Authorities would demand that the subject turn the voltage all the way to the max 450 V. The experiment revealed that more than 50% of the subjects would administer shock all the way until the end of the experiment, even after the shock reached lethal levels (Savalle). This conclusion, while disturbing, isn't surprising. Humans at times tend to blindly follow those they perceive as "in charge," much like a pack of wolves following the alpha male. Humans have been conditioned since early childhood not to question authority, whether it be a schoolteacher, a law enforcement agent, or even a parent.

Humans also subconsciously identify authority by appearance. People are involuntarily much more willing to obey an individual wearing clothing that may signify an upper-class status, such as a man wearing a suit and tie or a military officer's uniform. Savalle cites on his blog what happened if the experiment was "taken over by an 'ordinary member of the public' (a confederate) in everyday clothes rather than a lab coat. The obedience level dropped to 20%" (Savalle). The experiment's participants were much less willing to administer fatal levels of shock at the command of someone in ordinary clothing. So, what is the difference between a lab coat and a T-shirt? People usually correlate lab coats with jobs such as scientists or doctors, both usually highly-skilled and high-paying jobs. We tend to look at individuals who make more money than average and who have unique skills as persons of authority. There is a general level of respect that society has toward doctors and scientists, even though they are ordinary people just like us.

It's also important to note the power of indirect action. To explain, Milgram showed through a variation of his experiment that people are much more likely to shock the student at fatal levels if they are relaying the authority figure's commands to an assistant controlling the switches. Savalle states that "when participants could instruct an assistant (confederate) to press the switches, 92.5% shocked to the maximum 450 volts" (Savalle). People tend to feel less responsible for their actions if they are being indirectly done through another person. Almost every participant shocked the human subject at fatal levels if they were indirectly relaying the authority figure's orders. Recall the Eichmann trial after the Holocaust, where the Nazis were "just following orders."

When looking at the actions of individuals, it is best to keep it simple and look at their intention behind the action. The bottom line is that a general understanding of an individual's motive

is most important. The ethics of mankind are so complicated, and people from every profession weigh in on it. In spite of this, it is easier to keep a clear moral compass if it is instilled at a young age. Children should be raised to be morally righteous, so that when the opportunity presents itself, they can act as heroes and not villains.

Another idea to analyze when looking at why good people commit evil acts is the desire for vengeance. Vengeance is the result of an individual being treated wrongly or immorally at some point in their life. It is important to understand the effect that vengeance has on our actions and moral compass, and how some philosophers believe vengeance can be combated. Vengeance can completely cloud our morality, in a desperate attempt to avenge a past misdeed. Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher who struggled with the desire for vengeance, wrote that “in the end I fell victim to a ruthless sense of vengeance despite the fact that the very focus of my mode of thought lies on the rejection of all vengeance and punishment” (qtd. in Sineokaya 353-354). Nietzsche found that although he tried hard to be a forgiving man and reject the desire for vengeance, the sense was ruthlessly strong.

Recall the military and CIA personnel stationed at Abu Ghraib in Iraq. These servicemen were placed in a stressful environment, in charge of our country’s greatest enemies, and more importantly, after the events of September 11. The results of their actions could have simply been the fruits of a deeply-rooted desire for vengeance, even though none of these prisoners were directly responsible for bombing the World Trade Center. In fact, American personnel may have even justified their actions internally through the desire for vengeance.

Understanding the desires that may have taken hold of our soldiers’ and CIA personnel’s moral compasses is beneficial when looking at why this happened in the first place. On the other hand, it is even more important to understand the results of avenging a past misdeed. Vengeance is a nasty part of the cycle of violence, meaning that avenging a past misdeed will actually do more harm than good. Think of the comic book superhero, Batman, who witnessed the murder of his parents at a young age. Although a man with a past like his would most likely use his skill for vengeance and violence, Bruce Wayne vows never to kill another man. This ends the cycle, as the men he could have killed may have kids, who one day would grow up to seek vengeance as well.

Shestov explains that the only being that can repeal something that has existed in the past, like a misdeed, is God. He writes that “Nietzsche defines vengeance as the will to repeal a past misdeed... Truth is in the power of an Almighty Creator, who is capable of repealing something that has existed before” (qtd. in Sineoyaka 350). Shestov turns a moral problem into a spiritual problem. It is important to be at peace with the past, end the cycle of violence, and leave the rest to the will of God. The desire to avenge oneself may be strong, but in the end is unfulfilling and only skews our moral compass while harming others.

Once an understanding of why good people commit evil acts is reached, even more important is how to prevent and combat evil altogether. One way to understand the relationship between good and evil is to look at religious scriptures. The Bible is a great example of this. To start off, the Bible teaches that fear is the breeding ground for evil, and the only way to drive out fear is through perfect or unconditional love. When a man lives fearfully, this allows evil to manifest, thus making him selfish and nonempathetic. Satan was once an angel named Lucifer, who was beloved by many other angels. Satan craved power, and believed he was better than God, so as a result, God banished him from Heaven and sent him to reside in Hell. Christians argue that people who live selfishly are not of God, which results in evil behavior. The Bible teaches that God is love, and living a selfless and loving life is beneficial for all. Christ lived a life of love, and as a result, lived a life of selflessness and sacrificed His life for mankind.

To put it into a more modern perspective, an example of someone living fearfully is Nick Cruz, the Florida school shooter. Nick was bullied as a kid and didn't fit in well with his peers. As a result, he was a young student who lived his life afraid of others hurting him, and eventually, this fear

developed into a disregard for the wellness of others, and a regard for only the preservation of himself. Nick's fear evolved into horrible selfishness. His behavior relates to a psychological idea called The Pygmalion Effect. According to Dr. Travis Bradberry's article about the psychological forces of evil, the Pygmalion Effect is "the tendency people have to act the way that other people treat them" (Bradberry). Possibly in Nick's eyes, his inhumane act was putting the same fear he felt into the hearts of his peers. If Nick had been cared for and given the correct treatment and help at a young age, he would have grown up to be more empathetic, and would never have committed the selfish act that he did.

Phillip Zimbardo also greatly stresses the importance of being a hero and living selflessly. His idea of heroism aligns very well with biblical teachings. Zimbardo teaches that the key to stopping inhumane acts and evil altogether is living life selflessly, like a hero. He has founded and is the president of the Heroic Imagination Project, a non-profit organization in San Francisco. Zimbardo writes in his article, "From the Study of Evil to Promoting Heroism," that "HIP's purpose is to promote everyday heroism as: a) Antidote to inhumanity, corruption, and evil; b) Celebration of the positive potential of human nature" (qtd. in Zimbardo 5). Much like the teachings in the Bible, Zimbardo's goal is to teach people about the value of human life, and the tolerance of everyone.

The study of evil and why good people commit evil acts is such an interesting endeavor. Human ethics are beyond complex, as each individual situation has a host of variables that influence the outcome. Good people commit evil acts for several reasons, some very straightforward and others painstakingly complicated. The studies of Phillip Zimbardo have shed light on the psychological side of evil, and how complex it really is. The effect power has on an individual's morals and empathy, the pressure to conform, our blind obedience to authority, situational forces, and the desire for vengeance, give us insight towards the answer to this great question. There are many other factors that come into play as well. The one question that is straightforward and simple to answer is how to put a stop to evil. Living a selfless and loving life, much like Jesus Christ or any true heroes, is the key to preventing acts of inhumanity. As a society, we should strive every day to make the right choices and live selfless lives, not only to benefit ourselves, but more importantly, to benefit those around us.

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